

Julius Evola

MR. GURDJIEFF

Individuals who help us put a finger on the disturbing way in which the existence of the great majority of people has been, metaphysically speaking, degraded, are rare in our times and run the risk of being confused with charlatans.

To this category belongs, without a shadow of a doubt, the “mysterious Mr. Gurdjieff,” namely George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Although he died many years ago, the memory of his presence and the influence he exerted is still sharp, as testified by the works devoted to him and even the novels where he appears under another name. Louis Pauwels, the author of *The Morning of the Magicians*, was able to publish a volume of more than five hundred pages, which appeared in two successive editions, where he collected a great number of documents — articles, letters, memories, testimonies — concerning Gurdjieff.

In fact, Gurdjieff’s influence extended into the most diverse settings: the philosopher P. D. Ouspensky (who, based on Gurdjieff’s doctrines, wrote a work called *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, as well as *The Psychology of Man’s Possible Evolution*), the novelists Aldous Huxley and Arthur Koestler; the “functionalist” architect Frank Lloyd Wright; J.-B. Simpleton, the disciple of Einstein; Doctor Wakey, one of the greatest New York surgeons; Georgette Leblanc; J. Sharp, founder of the journal *The New Statesman*: all had contacts with Gurdjieff that left an impression.

Our character appeared for the first time in Saint Petersburg, shortly before the October Revolution. We don’t know much about what he did before: he could only say that he had traveled in the East to seek communities that guarded the remnants of a transcendent knowledge. But it would seem that he had been the principal tsarist agent in Tibet, that he had taken leave to retire to the Caucasus where he was, as a child, the schoolmate of Stalin.

In France, and then in Berlin, England, and the United States, he had been devoted to the organization of circles that followed his teachings, circles called “work groups.” In 1922 a French publisher

who had retired from business offered him the opportunity to make the chateau of Avon, near Fontainebleau, his “central” [headquarters] where he created something that was a combination of a school and a hermitage.

Among the rumors circulating in this connection, some relate to the political arena. Gurdjieff is said to have had contacts with Karl Haushofer, the well-known founder of “geopolitics,” who occupied a prominent place in the Third Reich. It is even said that these relations governed the choice of the swastika as the emblem of National Socialism, the swastika whose rotation is not towards the right, the symbol of wisdom, but towards the left, the symbol of power (as it was indeed the case).

What message did Gurdjieff bring? One that is disconcerting, to say the least. Few men “exist,” few have an “immortal” soul. Some of them have the seed, which can be developed. In general, one does not have an “Ego” at birth: it must be acquired. Those who do not reach that point dissolve upon their deaths. “A minute portion of them manage to have a soul.”

The man in the street is merely a simple machine. He lives in a state of sleep, as if hypnotized. He believes he acts and thinks, whereas he is “acted upon.” Impulses, reflexes, influences of all kinds act upon him. He does not have “being.” Gurdjieff’s manners were not at all delicate: “Vous pas comprendre, vous idiot complet, vous merdité” [“You do not understand, you complete idiot, your shittiness”], he often said in his atrocious French to those who approached him. Regarding Katherine Mansfield, who died at his hermitage of Avon in search of the “way,” Gurdjieff declared: “Moi pas connaître,” by which he meant that the deceased was nothing, that she did not “exist.”

Gurdjieff taught that ordinary life is that of an individual continually aspiring, or “sucking in.” “I am sucked in by my thoughts, by my memories, my desires, my feelings. By the beefsteak that I eat, the cigarette that I smoke, the love that I make, good weather, the rain, this tree, this car that passes, this book.” He acts to react. To “wake up.” Then a “Self” will be born, which, up to that point, did not exist. Then he will learn how to be, to be in everything that he does and feels, instead of being only a shadow of himself. Gurdjieff calls “real” the thoughts, feelings, etc. that manifest in line with this absolutely new existential dimension that the majority of people cannot even imagine.

He also distinguished in each individual the “essence” from the “person.” The essence constitutes one’s authentic quality, whereas the person is only the superficial social individual, constructed of miscellaneous parts. These two elements do not coincide: one meets people whose “person” is developed whereas their “essence” is null or is atrophied—and vice versa. In our world, the former situation is prevalent: men and women whose “person” is grotesquely exacerbated but whose “essence” is in an infantile state—if not completely absent.

This is not the place to discuss Gurdjieff’s teachings on the processes by which one can “wake up,” anchor oneself in one’s “essence,” and become a “being.” In any case, the starting point would be the practical, experiential recognition of one’s own “inexistence,” a quasi-somnambulistic state, the fact of being “sucked in” by things, by our thoughts and emotions. This is also the purpose of the “method of disorder”: to overturn the “machine” that one is, in order to become aware of the vacuum that it hides. It should not be surprising if some of those who followed Gurdjieff in this way faced extremely serious crises, upsetting their mental equilibrium to the point that they fled, or remembering with terror similar experiences where they almost had the impression of living death. As for those who stood up to the test and persisted in “work on oneself” along with Gurdjieff, they spoke about an incomparable sense of security and a new meaning given to their existence.

It would seem that Gurdjieff exerted—in an almost automatic and involuntary manner—on whoever approached him, an influence that could have positive or negative effects from one case to another. He unquestionably had some supranormal faculties. According to Ouspensky, Gurdjieff, thanks to certain experiences, was able to use a science learned in the East—and of which the West knows “only an unimportant part under the name of hypnotism”—to separate the “essence” from the “person” of a given individual—possibly revealing a child or an idiot in a highly cultivated and sophisticated guise, or, conversely, a highly differentiated “essence” beneath an outward appearance of nullity.

Among the testimonies collected by Pauwels, a particularly juicy one relates to the power, attributed also to certain Yogis in the Orient (and referred to by an author as worthy of credence as Sir John Woodroffe) “to call the woman back to the woman.” The person who reported the anecdote was in a New York restaurant with a young, self-assured female writer, to whom he pointed out the “famous”

Gurdjieff seated at a nearby table. The young woman stared at him with an air of superiority but then turned pale and nearly fainted. This surprised her companion, who knew how self-possessed she was. Later, she confided to him: “It was revolting! I looked at this man, and he was surprised by my glance. He then stared at me coldly, and, at that moment, I felt intimately assaulted with such precision that I reached orgasm!”

Gurdjieff was satisfied with only a few hours of sleep: he was called “the one who does not sleep.” He alternated between an almost Spartan lifestyle and banquets of a long-gone Russo-Oriental opulence. In 1934, he was the victim of a very serious automobile accident. He remained in a coma for three days, and when he awakened, he appeared to have been rejuvenated, as if the physical shock, instead of injuring his organism, had galvanized it.

Many things of this kind are told about him. I heard this directly from someone close to him who directed one of his “work groups” in Mexico. Of course, a process of “mythification” is inevitable in cases of this kind, and it is not easy to disentangle the real from the imaginary.

Gurdjieff left almost no writings, and those he did publish are of rather poor quality. But it is quite frequent that those who are “someone” have neither the qualities nor training to be a writer. They impart their teaching directly and exert an influence. As we said, aside from the collection of testimonies published by Pauwels under the title *Gurdjieff*, it fell to Ouspensky to write out his teachings.

Gurdjieff died at the age of 83, in full possession of his faculties, ironically saying to the disciples who attended him: “I leave you a fine mess!” He is still being quoted today, and here and there in England, France, and South Africa, the remnants of the groups that had been constituted under its influence are to be found.

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Translated by Greg Johnson